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TAGS: [EAID](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [SNAR](#) [HO](#)
SUBJECT: NEW HONDURAN MINISTER OF GOVERNANCE AND JUSTICE
VICTOR MEZA

Classified By: Ambassador Charles Ford, reason 1.4 (b & d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Ambassador Ford paid a courtesy call on the new head of the Ministry of Governance and Justice (MGJ), Victor Meza, on March 14. Meza indicated that his appointment as the only "independent" minister was a signal of the Zelaya administration's intention to depart radically from the usual way of doing business. He further indicated that the Zelaya Government had prioritized decentralization for its final two years, and that civil society (where Meza's professional roots lie) would be an important partner of the Ministry. Meza described the challenges he is facing at the Ministry, including reestablishing internal leadership, coordination with other ministries, and investigating procurement irregularities and suspected corruption at the Head Office of Migration and Foreigners. Additional concerns expressed by Meza were the increase in visas issued to Cubans by the Honduran Embassy in Havana, the lack of a national security policy, and the consistent emigration of Honduras' best and brightest. End summary.

A new way of doing business

¶2. (C) On March 14, Ambassador Ford, Acting USAID Director, and USAID DG Director paid a courtesy call on Victor Meza, the new Minister of Governance and Justice. Prior to his appointment as minister, Meza was a political analyst and head of the Honduran Document Center (CEDOH), a non-profit organization that analyzes and documents issues and trends in Honduras. (Comment: Post also has information that he was involved in political activism, including labor union movements. End comment.) In the meeting, Meza highlighted his civil society, rather than political, origins and his status as the only "independent" minister (meaning he is not publicly affiliated with either of the two main political parties) in the President's cabinet. As this ministerial position is usually very politically charged, Meza said his appointment signaled President Zelaya's intention to deviate from "business as usual." Despite expectations that the two years prior to the November 2009 general elections will be politically charged, Meza said Hondurans can be assured that his ministry will not politicize issues such as decentralization. He pledges to work closely with civil society, and stated that there is new energy and commitment among his ministry's staff.

Strong support for decentralization

¶3. (C) Minister Meza declared his support for the decentralization of government authority, responsibility, and resources to the local level, including in the key sectors of education and health. He said decentralization is one of the priorities of the Zelaya administration for its last two years, and that "decentralization is State policy." He

further added: "A more decentralized country is a more democratic one." He believes Honduran civil society is an important partner in this process and said that there will be no political discrimination in the decentralization process. The Ambassador mentioned that in his recent meetings with the mayors of Tela and Puerto Cortes, they expressed the need for central government support in the decentralization process.

Decentralization strategy

¶4. (U) Meza discussed his recent request that all central government ministries and offices identify short, medium, and long-term decentralization opportunities that would be incorporated into a consolidated, central government-wide decentralization strategy. He said the Ministry will prioritize decentralization of authority, responsibility, and resources currently in the Ministries of Health and Education and the Honduran Social Investment Fund (FHIS), and he expects that the consolidated decentralization plan will be reflected in the 2008 budget.

An old debate

¶5. (C) Meza claims that decentralization efforts have been the victim of an obsolete debate that centers around challenges to "neoliberal economic development policy." He said it is difficult to gain support for decentralization among those who continue to believe that decentralization means privatization and that it represents a loss of power for the State and a relinquishment of the State's responsibilities to the private sector. Meza said that it is necessary to first consolidate government before decentralizing it, since "one does not want to decentralize

disorder." The Ambassador highlighted specific USG assistance in the decentralization arena and pledged to continue our support.

Rebuilding leadership

¶6. (C) Meza discussed the poor shape of the ministry he inherited. He said that normally the Minister of Governance and Justice should take the lead among equal ministries, after the Ministry of the Presidency. In his opinion, former Minister Jorge Arturo Reina abdicated this role, and the subsequent lack of leadership led to incoherent or nonexistent government-wide strategies. He also criticized the former Minister's internal management of the Ministry. Meza said he faces the challenge of reasserting these traditional leadership and management roles.

Security strategy

¶7. (C) As part of his plan to reassert the leadership role of the Ministry, Meza said he will pursue the development of a state security policy under his ministry's lead, rather than under the Ministry of Security. His argument is that this issue is "broader than just the police." Meza claims that the GOH does not currently have a security policy, only "free-floating elements." He sees the police as part of the problem, rather than the solution, and said that "one cannot share information or intelligence with corrupt police." Meza added that he is working on the creation of a comparative studies institute for Central America, where issues such as security can be studied from an academic angle. He also said he is organizing a conference on security to be held in Honduras.

Possible corruption in procurement

¶8. (C) Meza and his staff are currently reviewing previous procurement practices, particularly the hiring of consultants. He said it appears there may have been

procurement fraud, such as payments for nonexistent consultants. He said he will take what evidence he has to the Supreme Audit Institution (TSC), and if the TSC does not pursue the case, he said the Ministry will do so.

Problems in Migration

¶9. (C) Meza highlighted the dire shape of the Head Office of Migration and Foreigners. Strengthening this unit is one of Meza's priorities. Meza is worried about corruption in this unit and the possible influence of criminal elements.

(Comment: This statement is of concern, as Post has a good working relationship with the head of the Migration office, who appears to be proactive in combatting fraud. Post will investigate further. End comment.) Meza talked extensively about his concern regarding the issuance of visas at the Honduran Embassy in Havana to Cubans for suspect reasons. These Cubans often travel onward to the United States, he claimed. Meza suspected a link between the Cubans and the National Congress. When Meza recently revoked the visa of a particular Cuban, he said a high government official immediately protested, despite clear justification for revoking the visa. Meza claims the number of Cubans coming to or passing through Honduras is increasing daily. He recognizes this as a security issue, and said the number of migrants suggested the involvement of organized criminal elements. The Ambassador officered his assistance with this matter, suggesting the USG and Ministry could organize a working group to address the issue.

Stemming the drain of brain and brawn

¶10. (U) Regarding the emigration of Hondurans to the U.S., Meza highlighted a theme that emerged in the National Dialogue (a process that he led prior to assuming his current post), that of the need for a migration policy that focuses on local economic and labor policy. Meza sees the emigration of so many Hondurans as a serious human capital issue for Honduras, which is losing its best and brightest. One area of high importance for him is looking at how Hondurans can develop local solutions to the labor/employment problems. Meza said he is working with the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA) on this issue. He also said Honduras needs to prioritize rural and labor projects to stem the flow of immigrants. Meza added that the stimulation of private sector investment is needed.

Ready for greater cooperation

¶11. (SBU) Meza confirmed that his doors are open to greater cooperation and a more continuous and productive relationship with the USG. Meza reiterated that there are many good people at his ministry that are not compromised by corruption.

Comment

¶12. (C) Post believes this was a productive meeting and that there are many areas that we can work with the Ministry of Justice and Governance. In regards to the security sector, however, we believe Meza's analysis is overly simplistic. There are serious flaws in the justice system in Honduras, however, the problems are not only with the police, but also with the prosecutors and judges. All three sectors-- Ministry of Security, Attorney General's Office, and the Supreme Court-- must participate as equals to develop security policy and improve the security situation in Honduras. Instead of writing off the police, Post believes the better strategy is to assist them in improving their law enforcement capabilities and combating corruption. We will continue to work towards that end. End Comment.

Ford